QUESTION:

If I were to ask the average mainstream Sunday morning Christian why they are a Christian I would probably get an answer (other than to meet friends in church) such as this, “To be saved and go to heaven when I die.” When I look at the obituaries in the newspaper, I so often see a statement assuring me that “Mable is with Jesus now,” and was advised by a bumper sticker yesterday, “Heaven or Hell: It’s Your Choice.”

If Jesus’ message was as you and others state, “repent now for the Kingdom of God is just around the corner,” affirmed by Paul and the early church, how did we get this fast-track-ticket-to-heaven in contemporary popular Christianity?

I cannot find that explicitly in the New Testament (except for some hints in the Gospel of John). How did we get from the Apocalyptic Jesus to the Pearly Gates?

RESPONSE:

Ah, this is a great question, and as with all great questions, it does not have an easy answer! I give a short version of the answer in my book Jesus Interrupted, in the chapter on “Who Invented Christianity,” where I discuss the “invention” of heaven and hell. I don’t mean, of course, that anyone actually invented them, but I think the idea that such places exist were not the original ideas of Jesus and his followers, but were later developments among Christian thinkers in later times. And since these ideas did not exist at one point among Christians, and then later became very much Christian ideas, then in that sense, SOMEBODY came up with them (or lots of somebodies), and that would involve their “invention.”

So if the short version is in my book, let me give you a hopelessly abbreviated version here.

The starting point: I’ve argued for many years now that Jesus was a Jewish apocalypticist. This is not just my idea – it’s been the majority view among scholars of the New Testament for over a century. But some scholars disagree – which is why I (and others) have had to argue the point. Jewish apocalypticists were dualists, who believed that there were two fundamental components of reality, good and evil. God was of course over all that was good; the devil was over all that was evil (when Jews started thinking apocalyptically – about 160 years before Jesus during the period known as the Maccabean Revolt – is when they first came up with the idea of the Devil). God has the power of angels, and life, and righteousness on his side – these are all cosmic forces in the world; the Devil has the power of demons, and death, and sin on his. All things—and everybody – participates in this dualism, and so is either on the side of God and good or the Devil and evil. There is no neutral territory.

This cosmic dualism got worked out in a kind of historical scenario, where it was thought that there were two “ages” on earth: the present evil age, controlled by the Devil and his minions, and the future good age, to be controlled by God. At some point in the very near future, God was going to overthrow the forces of evil and bring in a good kingdom here on earth, a utopian state in which there would be no more pain, misery, or suffering, no more war, epidemic, starvation, or natural disaster. God himself would rule supreme.

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